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TOWN OF ROBINSON
Refractories Company Town
Robinson
Indiana County
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-5975

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 37127
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

TOWN OF ROBINSON
Refractories Company Town

HABS No. PA-5975

Location: Near State Highway 259 and Conemaugh River,
Indiana County, Pennsylvania

Established: 1880 as Garfield, name changed 1902

Brickyard
established: 1900, closed 1987

Company
houses built: ca. 1905-30

Significance: Elliott Robinson was born on a farm near Robinson
in 1808. He founded the town of Garfield, later
called Robinson, in 1880 and in 1887 established
the Garfield Fire Clay Company with his sons. In
the early twentieth century, the company emerged
as the leader in local refractories production.
The Garfield company was distinctive within the
refractories industry in the region because it
continued to operate as an independent, family-run
business throughout its history and was never
merged with one of the national refractories
companies. Robinson's descendants ran the company
until the last brickyard was closed in 1979.

Project
Information: The results of the study of refractory brickyards
and towns was published in 1993: Kim E. Wallace,
Brickyard Towns: A History of Refractories
Industry Communities in South-Central Pennsylvania
(Washington, D.C.: America's Industrial Heritage
Project and Historic American Buildings
Survey/Historic American Engineering Record,
National Park Service).
The contents of this publication were transmitted
to the Library of Congress in report form. See
additional information on the refractories
industry under HABS No. PA-5973, Refractories
Company Towns, Mt. Union, Huntingdon County,
Pennsylvania. Research notes, field photos and
copies of historic photos collected during the
project were transmitted to the AIHP Collection,
Special Collections, Stapleton Library, Indiana
University of Pennsylvania, Indiana, PA 15705.

History

Garfield Refractories Company, with an office in Bolivar in northeastern Westmoreland County, remained independent of national companies throughout the twentieth century. Its last operating brickyard was in Robinson, across the Conemaugh River in southern Indiana County. When it closed in 1979, it was still run by descendants of Elliot Robinson, an area native who opened a brickyard in the 1850s. An abundance of fire clay, coal for firing, and access to transportation made Bolivar and Robinson a prime site for brick making; at least five separate brickyards operated there for many years. The first, sited along the Pennsylvania Mainline Canal at Bolivar in the 1840s, was one of the earliest in the state, apparently predated only by a brickyard in Philadelphia and one at Queen's Run in Clinton County.¹

Because of their place in the early history of the industry, one might expect the development of the Bolivar brickyards to reflect local family initiative and control, while those founded later, in the era of mergers and incorporations, were more likely to become subsidiary interests of outside investors. In fact, the early history of these brickyards seems to typify the industry and business practices in general during this period in the involvement of a number of changing partnerships whose members were both resident and non-resident.² By the end of the century, joint ownership gave way to control by two local families: the Hammonds lived in Bolivar, the Robinsons in both Bolivar and Robinson.

Local businessman Elliott Robinson was born in 1808 and lived on his father's farm on the Indiana County side of the river. Like several other brick manufacturers, he started his career as proprietor of a boat on the Pennsylvania canal. He was also involved in storekeeping, farming, and lumbering, and owned flour and sawmills in Bolivar and the surrounding township. He made his first venture into brick making with Benney in 1857 and was founding partner in at least three other companies. His last investment, made with his sons in 1887 to found the Garfield Fire Clay Company, outlasted all the other local companies, finally closing as Garfield Refractories in 1979.³

¹Arthur F. Greaves-Walker, "History of Development of the Refractories Industry in the United States," Bulletin of the American Ceramic Society (June 1941), 214. Corinne Azen Krause, Refractories: The Hidden Industry, A History of Refractories in the United States, 1860-1985 (Pittsburgh: American Ceramic Society, 1987), 6-7.

²Alfred Chandler, The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977), 36-37.

³"History of Robinson," Blairsville Dispatch (May 23, 1935). Clarence D. Stephenson, Indiana County 175th Anniversary History (Indiana, Pa.: A. G. Halldin Publishing Company, 1989), IV:362-63, III:298-300. "Robinson" and "Brick Yards" in Cunningham, "History of Bolivar."

Robinson founded a town on part of the family farm in 1880 and named it Garfield after the U.S. president elected that year. The family business was named for the town, and an adjacent brickworks was operating by 1900. When the town was granted a post office in 1902, it was renamed Robinson in honor of its founder who had died a few years before. Although members of the Robinson family did live in Garfield/Robinson, documentary evidence more often places Elliott in Bolivar. He was on the building committee of the Bolivar United Methodist Church in 1856, and both the 1867 and 1876 county atlases show the residence of E. Robinson at the corner of Water and First streets in Bolivar. Indiana County tax records in 1890 listed him as a "gentleman" resident in Bolivar. His son John moved from Tyrone to Robinson about 1898 to help run the company. John's daughter, Mary Godfrey, remembers helping her mother redecorate their new house after the move. She also recalled that because she was a girl she was not allowed to visit the nearby brickyard and that her family later moved to Bolivar so that she and her brothers could go to school in a safer environment.⁴ Although she could not elaborate on what made Bolivar "safer," a comparison of the architecture in the two towns suggests that the Robinson family would feel more comfortable in the older, larger town which offered better services, had a greater number of well-to-do residents, and had established residential gradations along class lines. The office of Garfield Refractories was sometimes located in Bolivar and at other times in Robinson.

The town of Robinson was laid out in a rough square with four east-west and five north-south streets, the Conemaugh River on its southern border, and a township road (now state route 259) on the east. It was expanded in 1902 by the "Robinson Brothers Addition," a rectangular plot with one north-south and seven east-west streets, on the east side of the township road. It was never incorporated and is still administered by West Wheatfield Township.⁵

Although the Robinsons controlled the organization of land and the town's water supply, they seem to have encouraged private ownership of houses. Two double houses owned by the company first appear in township tax records between 1900 and 1905. The company's house inventory peaked at only eleven about 1930; ten were single dwellings, one was a double. In the assessment

⁴Ibid. "Bolivar" in Beers (1867) and Davis (1876). Tax assessment records, West Wheatfield Township, Indiana County. Mary Margaret Robinson Godfrey, interview by author, Ligonier, Pa., September 24, 1991.

⁵Garfield Fire Clay Company and Plan of Garfield formerly E. Robinson Estate, West Wheatfield Township, Indiana County, Pa. Recorded October 3, 1903. D. L. Moorhead, Map of Robinson Brothers Addition to Garfield, Indiana Co., Pa. November 1896, recorded October 3, 1903.

listing, each house was noted separately because there was such a variety of valuations and lot sizes that none could be grouped together. The lack of consistency suggests that there was never a strict company housing policy nor a concerted effort to build houses to attract and keep employees. The fact that the company did own houses nevertheless shows how much it was taken as a standard practice. Local residents identified one surviving company house, a double dwelling at the corner of Chestnut and Jefferson streets.⁶

Virtually all the houses in the community are frame, vernacular buildings dating from the late nineteenth century through the 1920s. One striking exception is located east of the Robinson Brothers Addition. It is a square-plan, pyramid-roofed structure built of hollow tile and refractory bricks, the only example found in the survey. According to the current resident, the Garfield Fire Clay Company built it in 1917 for Albert Ayres, one of their managers. Flawed bricks that could not be sold were carted from the yard to the site, and carefully selected and laid to organize sizes and hide flaws. The house is built into the side of a hill and has two full stories. A privy was also built of the buff- and gold-colored bricks. Reportedly, the company also built other frame houses as a benefit for upper level employees.⁷

A Garfield Fire Clay Company store was opened shortly before 1900. The original wood-frame store was replaced by a buff-brick building that stands facing the state road near the former plant entrance just opposite the bridge to Bolivar. The store was closed in the late 1930s when the Garfield Company went into bankruptcy and control shifted from Francis Robinson to John Rugh; both were grandsons of Elliott Robinson.⁸

⁶Tax assessment records, West Wheatfield Township, Indiana County. Mabel Liebold, interview by author, Robinson, Pa., September 25, 1991. Harry I. Miller, interview by author, Robinson, Pa., September 25, 1991.

⁷Miller interview.

⁸Liebold and Godfrey interviews. Erma Gibson, interview by author, Bolivar, Pa., September 25, 1991. Tax assessment records, West Wheatfield Township, Indiana County. Robinson in Bolivar (Sanborn Map Company, 1909, 1915, 1927).

Reproduced from Wallace, Kim E., Brickyard Towns: A History of Refractories Industry Communities in South-Central Pennsylvania 1993 (Washington, D.C.: America's Industrial Heritage Project and HABS/HAER, National Park Service).